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The Silenced and Indispensible: Gurkhas in Private Security

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**ABSTRACT**

Using postcolonial analysis coupled with fieldwork in both Afghanistan and Nepal, I argue that contemporary colonial relations within private security make possible a gender and racial ordering of security contractors. This ordering of contractors results in vastly different conditions of possibilities depending on the contractors' histories and nationalities. Empirically documenting perspectives from Gurkhas, constituted as racialised security contractors, this article contributes to the existing literatures in both private security and postcolonial studies by 1) providing a needed racial and gendered analysis from the position of the racialised security contractors, and 2) empirically documenting a growing subaltern group of men participating as security contractors.

**KEYWORDS:** private security, private military companies, gurkhas, Afghanistan, martial race, postcolonial, masculinities, gender

## INTRODUCTION

Examining private military companies have been a growing field of study over the past decade and research on them has worked to expose gendered images of men and masculinities.[i] Some of these gendered representations of contractors are mentioned in ethnographic studies of security contractors, drawing a homogenous portrait of rugged, tough men who fight for money and for their nations' values (Higate 2009; 2012a). Only recently have academics and journalists highlighted the growing participation in the industry from men in the global South.[ii] [iii] These scholars document how men from the global South take up poorly paid and unregulated work for the benefit of Western geopolitical polices and the overall security industry—an empirical point which speaks to existing feminist and international political economy scholarship discussing global South women's labour and migration trends (Enloe 1989; Bakan and Stasiulis 2005; Gonzalez 2007). However, while this work is important, it fails to explore how men positioned at the margins of this security industry make sense of their gendered experiences.[1]

Gurkhas are among a variety of men from the global South who participate in private security as racialised contractors. The imagery of the Gurkha brings feelings of admiration to most UK citizens. Through popular narratives we are nostalgically reminded of the colonial military history of Gurkhas' bravery, fierceness and loyalty to the British Empire. Their heroic pursuits and martial attributes are written about in numerous books detailing

the inhospitable terrains that make them hearty men who have brute strength and fortitude, yet obedient and courteous to authority due to their highly structured social attributes. [iv] These nostalgic images also play out in contemporary politics, highlighted in Joanna Lumley's pursuit for Gurkhas' settlement rights. In the media depictions surrounding settlement rights, Gurkhas were seen as both fierce and brave and yet in need of guidance and help by their British counterparts. In this case, Lumley was narrated as a white daughter of a British Gurkha officer (BBC News 2009). Silencing actual Gurkhas and their individual efforts, the Gurkha settlement rights became largely known in media depictions and photos as Lumley's fight for the Gurkha. These narrations and images of Lumley in the forefront and Gurkhas in the background indicate that the colonial relationship between these men and the British is alive and well in contemporary politics.

Colonial histories set the terms through which differences are constructed and experienced amongst men and women globally. Taking colonial histories seriously, I apply postcolonial analysis to my fieldwork in Afghanistan and Nepal. This analysis reveals the interplay between histories and current security markets that constitute a variety of security contractor subjects. In particular, I highlight three security subject positions: the high- and low-profile white Westerner contractors and the racialised Gurkha. Using material from interviews with Gurkhas working in private security, this article seeks to illuminate how Gurkhas make sense of their own subject positions and how they relate to their Western counterparts.

**INTERVIEWS AND METHODOLOGY**

The empirical material included in this article originates from interviews I conducted while in Afghanistan and Nepal between 2008 and 2010. All the Gurkha interviewees came into private security after working with the British Military, Indian Military or the Singaporean Police. They all are Nepalese and had been working in Afghanistan anywhere from a few months to many years. I have used aliases of those interviewed to protect their anonymity but have documented their background and experience. The informants quoted in this article are Barat, a private security contractor with Singaporean Police background; Fabien, an advocate for Gurkhas who is currently working in Kabul; Rabindra, a security contractor working in Kabul for only a few months and with six years' experience in the Indian Army; Mohan, a former British Gurkha with various experience in private security throughout the Middle East; and Kavindra, Murhan and Baharder, all former Indian Army Gurkhas with various levels of experience in private security.

The interviews were qualitative and in-depth, occurring in both individualised and focus group format. Importantly, these interviews are not meant to be an exhaustive documentation of a Gurkha experience (as if this experience could actually be captured). Instead, they are meant to shed light onto the racialised differences in living and working conditions and how the racialised contractors make sense of this difference. The empirical components of this article focus on three main threads discussed in the interviews. The first, entitled 'Better to Die than be a Coward' after the Gurkha motto, explores how the interviewees understand what it means to be a Gurkha and the meanings they attribute to this identity. The second, entitled 'Almost but Not White', is a quote taken from Homi

Bhabha and explores how the Gurkhas interviewed make sense of their racialised subject positions and their conditions of possibilities within the security industry. The third, entitled 'Moving Margins', discusses the ways in which these men are transforming and shifting their life trajectories for themselves and their families.

## LOCATING RACIALISED MASCULINITIES IN PRIVATE SECURITY

The security industry and the people participating in it are heavily gendered. As a starting point, private security work is made up of primarily men; to be a security contractor demands 'manliness' of different performances and understandings. The concept of masculinities helps us to reveal different material and discursive arrangements amongst gendered orders (Connell 2002; Higate 2009, 2012a). Understanding masculinities and men has been a concern for masculinities studies scholars for the past twenty-five years, and more recently for feminists and gender theorists.[v] Both feminist and masculinities literatures argue that social relations are configured through power processes shaping gender relations. Theorising men and masculinities has been illustrated through case studies depicting males as victims and women as embodying masculinities in male dominated or militarised environments, and through violence and political and social transitions.[vi] Through these studies, masculinities are shown to be one such identifier that helps us to understand why some men acquire power and have access to greater material resources than others. For most Western theorists who engage in masculinities studies, there is recognition of how masculinities are implicated in all aspects of sociality.[vii]

In isolation, the concept of masculinities is insufficient to understand the complex and dynamic power relations founded in the representation and subjectivity of particular beings (Archer 2001; Morrell and Swart 2005), specifically with the use of third country nationals (TCNs) in Afghanistan and in situations where there are a growing number of people that are commonly represented in the security industry through their colonial histories (Sherman and DiDomenico 2009; Higate 2012c). Incorporating postcolonial analysis within masculinities studies offers a much more nuanced conceptual tool with which to understand some of the dynamics occurring amongst groups of security contractors. For many feminist and gender theorists, this type of research has exposed more complex gendering processes taking place within nationalisation and postcolonial political movements throughout countries in the global South where questions of intersectionality have been raised (Morrell and Swart 2005; Peterson 2007; Parpart 2008). It has also illustrated a diversity of oft-conflicting subject positions in groups of men, as well as identified how individuals are understood and how they understand and negotiate their own positions within particular gender orders.

Pioneering writing by Fanon (1963), Said (1979), Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (2004) remain foundational in postcolonial analysis. These scholars developed an explanation of power, gender and racial order from the standpoint of the seemingly dispossessed living outside the Western sphere. For these scholars, global power configurations were shaped by the colonial encounters between the global North and their former colonies.[viii] These authors and more contemporary ones such as Young, Agathangelou, Ling, Venn, Huddard and Chowdhury claim that in various forms and processes, colonialism has set the

over-determined Eurocentric narrative of history whereby the 'rest of the world is positioned as always in the process of catching up…always in process of casting off the obstacles of "arrested development" that prevent them from being "properly civilized"' (Venn 2006). The postcolonial condition is more than a specific historical event or demarcation by a particular moment (Morrell and Swart 2005), and most scholars recognise that because there is no overarching *natural* authority for this Eurocentric narrative, it remains unstable. The instability of the narrative creates space for the seemingly disempowered colonised men and women to find agency in both resisting and transforming their current conditions of possibilities.

**DOMINATING MASCULINITIES: GIVING 'WHITE' SECURITY A HISTORY**

The archetypal security contract continues in the image of the white specially-trained Westerner. Yet, like the Gurkha, this image does not come into play without a history or an immediate relation to national and global politics in which its subjects find themselves. Private security has a long and contentious history, from its origins in Machiavelli, to 'dogs of war' in the 1970s throughout Africa and Latin America, to Executive Outcomes (EO) operations in the 1990s (Howe 1998) and now contemporary operations globally. Throughout the changes in security operations over the years, private security companies and contractors have proved to be both versatile and adaptable to their immediate geopolitical situations. Joachim and Schneiker (2012) along with Higate (2012a, 2012b) are a few key scholars who have documented the 'mutable masculinities'[ix] this industry has performed in order to on the one hand continue to turn profits in the corporate sector and

on the other map out a sense of professionalism for contractors on the ground. In both accounts the professional contractor continues to be seen as white and Western. Within the dominant over-determined contractor archetype, there are two competing images: the self-fetishising hypermasculine contractor, who is often understood to be American, and the lower-profile masculine contractor, often understood to be British or of another Western nationality (Higate 2012a; Higate 2012b).

The notion of the over–the-top, white, dominant, hypermasculine performance within the security industry finds support in accounts such as Schumacher's (2006) *A Bloody Business: America's War Zone Contractors and the Occupation of Iraq*. In this account, the security contractor subject is forced to operate rather autonomously with few amenities in hostile terrain. However, for many academic and journal writers, he is seen as dangerous and unnecessary.[x] (The alternative image is that of the level-headed contractor, illustrated in autobiographical-style books such as Shepherd's (2008) *The Circuit*. For these men, maintaining a low profile and only reacting when absolutely necessary mitigates insecurity for their clients and themselves. Higate draws an interesting relational aspect to these seemingly dichotomous security subjects. Through his ethnographic research, he indicates that the cool-headed masculinity of the lower-profile contractor establishes his sense of professionalism in direct contrast to his counterpart over-the-top American contractor. The low-profile masculinity subject sees himself as ideal for the industry because he does not share his hypermasculine security subject's attributes of being unprofessional and dangerous (Higate 2012a; 2012b). Yet these two dominating white masculinities rely on colonial logics that constitute and, at the same time, sustain their privileged position within

the security industry. Here the non-white contractor is made silenced and indispensible: silenced because analysis into this racialised subject's participation within the industry remains underdeveloped, and unacknowledged and indispensible because the security industry relies on his underpaid and unregulated labour.

## CONSTITUTING GURKHA: WHY HISTORIES AND MARTIAL RACE MATTER

Gurkhas came to be understood and known to the West through their military engagements with the British and Indian militaries and through a process of martial race.[xi] Martial race was a part of a larger colonial project embedded in enlightenment thought and Victorian mania for scientific classifications; namely, that we can know, categorise and justify control over people with the use of science (Parsons 1999; Khalidi 2001-2002). Implicating military anthropologists and scientists alike in these projects, men were measured, weighed and assessed based on ideas of sexual prowess, martial performances and cultural heritage (Tucker 1957; Caplan 1995; Khalidi 2001-2002).

Martial races were more than just racialised stereotypes whereby the coloniser drew on cheap and trustworthy soldiers to fight their wars. The discourses also justified why some races and people were more destined to conquer and rule than others (Khalidi 2001-2002; Saint-Aubin 2005: 24). In regards to India, martial race was a strategy that the British military advocated after the Sepoy Mutiny (Coleman 1999; Khalidi 2001-2002; Bullock 2009). In the mutiny, the higher-caste Indians serving with the British ignited an armed resistance against the British whilst the Gurkhas maintained their commitment and loyalty

to the British Empire. It was during this mutiny that Gurkhas solidified their loyal and brave status amongst British military soldiers—a status that is celebrated today in both the British and Indian militaries (Khalidi 2001-2002). Importantly, martial race was not a top-down process where the Gurkha was relegated to the position of passive recipient. The projects resulted in significant social transformation within Nepalese domestic spheres (Tucker 1957; Saint-Aubin 2005). Men recruited as Gurkhas by the British were able to increase their economic and social capital, leading to grassroots development projects in their local communities as well as the gaining of personal wealth in Nepal (Caplan 1995; Saint-Aubin 2005).

The 'fierce warrior' attribute founded in their martial race has also led to the desirability of Gurkhas on the open market and in many respects have afforded Nepalese men opportunities to continue to engage in labour outside their country, albeit in dangerous spaces. Vines (1999) details the Gurkhas' role as martial men in private security in Sierra Leone and Angola in the 1990s. In Vines's discussion, Gurkhas did not appear to be merited on their individual attributes but rather grouped together as a 'fierce warrior' race (Vines 1999: 123), with some claiming them to be above the skill and natural aptitude of any white Western or local contractor, whilst others claiming them deficient. Overall, Gurkhas were and continue to be understood through their martial race and natural attributes as warriors.

## 'BETTER TO DIE THAN BE A COWARD': UNDERSTANDING OF SELF AS GURKHA

All the Gurkhas I interviewed shared similar understandings of what it meant to be a Gurkha. For them, the term 'Gurkha' was most associated with honesty, integrity, bravery, loyalty and discipline. In an interview with Kavindra, he described Gurkhas' attributes and renown:

> We are known [as] the Gurkhas all over the world, which you have heard and seen in Singapore, Britain, Brunei and India… Peoples understand [the Gurkha] as loyalty, honestly honorable and discipline. The Gurkhas are very well mannered, very good person, very energetic; whatever instructions come down from higher we will obey.

Not only are honor and discipline prominent in Kavindra's description of the Gurkha, he also points out the subordinate mindset and absolute commitment to following orders from higher-ups as integral to being a Gurkha. Here, a Gurkha is understood to be disciplined and ready to follow commands. Barat, Kitendra and Fabien shared a similar view. Adding to Kavindra's descriptions, these men commented that

> nowadays we are using Gurkha, our surname, like we are proud we are Gurkha…because it is a word of honor and bravery…mostly Gurkhas are very honesty and very brave, that's all Gurkhas, people don't know his name but people say he's very honest and a brave man, full of discipline. They say Gurkhas is a man of bravery.

In both responses, discipline and bravery were key social attributes in understanding what it means to these men to be a Gurkha. Conversely, it was made clear to me that not all Nepalese men are Gurkhas. For Barat, a Gurkha needed to have specific military/police service background and international experience. He stated that 'those who are serving in the Nepal military, they are not a real Gurkha. Mostly they call me a Gurkha because I work overseas'. (In Barat's opinion, having overseas experience (such as time spent in the Singaporean Police, Indian Army or British Military) is the factor that determines who is a real Gurkha.

While Kajividra agreed with Barat's understanding of Gurkhas, he also argued that there was something specific in manners that could be used to differentiate them from their Nepalese civilian counterparts. Discipline also remains an important distinguishing factor:

> All the Nepalese are not the Gurkhas. You can find out whether they are civilian or Gurkhas from the way they talk to you or certain manners. Normally Gurkhas will respect you very well and they will talk to you very politely. Civilians have different types of characters. They can talk very politely but you can easily find out. There will be slight differences. This is the way to know from their discipline and from they way they dress up.

Becoming a Gurkha in Nepal is viewed by these men as a source of pride for both the prestige and economic stability it affords. Not only does it pay well, the actual recruitment process is gruelling and takes several months to complete, with a low pass rate for both the

British and Indian militaries (Barat , Mohan). The competitive nature of the process, along with the financial benefits associated with being a Gurkha, continues to make it a highly sought profession. These reasons underpin Barat's desire to become a Gurkha:

> My friends want to join the British army and then I was 17 and I hoped that I would too. We always used to talk about it. These [Gurkhas] come back from Malay and they come back to Nepal and they had a good life and a good job. My father and uncle said British army and I asked my uncle if I can join but he said to study first. He encouraged me to join the Singapore police. It is a long job and I can serve for 35 years. So I can work for a long time and get a good pension.

For Barat and his family, education was important as it provided new economic opportunities. Because of this, he was encouraged to study before becoming a Gurkha. When Barat decided that the education route was not appropriate for him, as he claimed not to have the right aptitude, he expressed the desire to become a Gurkha because of the economic stability and international travel it offered. However, for Murhan, becoming a Gurkha had always been his ultimate goal. He wanted to follow the tradition of his Gurkha father and grandfather, but also sought the attendant status one achieves in Nepal. Murhan stated that 'once you have been selected in the final selection [to become a Gurkha], you will become a hero'.

All the men shared stories of pride and local esteem associated with being a Gurkha in Nepal. Interestingly, most of the men interviewed continued to follow colonial logics,

reinforcing the white Westerner as the ideal security contractor. The closer a Gurkha could mimic the Westerner in security, the higher status he felt he would achieve. This then highlighted a subgroup of Gurkhas expressed throughout the interviews. Those interviewed claimed the Indian Gurkha was not as good as the Singaporean Police Gurkha because he did not have the same competency in English (the standard Western language used in security). Moreoever, the Indian Gurkha was not a specialist trained to the British standard and did not have the international experience as those Gurkhas who worked with the British military or Singaporean police. Barat, Fabien and Kitendra all further argued that the Singaporean Police Gurkha was not as highly skilled for security contract work as the British Gurkha because he did not have the necessary military experience in hostile environments or the specific training from the British military.

In the interview with Barat, Kitendra and Fabien, Barat commented that 'the British do more training, so the training side, very very good in British'. Kitendra supported this remark by stating that 'they [the Indians] are better in battlefield, but tactically the British are more good because they have more training and newer equipment'. Pay was also considered important in determining hierarchy amongst Gurkhas. Fabien further claimed that British Gurkhas are of high esteem because

> they got the salary and then when they come back to Nepal their salary is high. Also they want to go to Europe and see and experience the lifestyle of Europe. India is our neighbour; we can go there whenever.

The esteem associated with British Gurkhas had to do with pay, specialist training and the ability to travel and experience international communities. Rabindra supported Fabien's viewpoint but also highlighted the tradition within his own family as an important motivator for becoming a British Gurkha:

> First of all my dream was to join the British army. Since I was small I have been seen my seniors, my grandfather and my uncles. They were from the British army and they were having a good life and so I got some inspiration from them and I tried to join the British army and now I joined the Indian army.

Rabindra's desire to initially join the British military illustrates the overall sense of exceptionalism as well as hierarchy of subclassifications of Gurkha that emerged through these interviews. Most men interviewed first had aspirations for British training, then Singaporean training; only upon failing that would they become an Indian Gurkha. Despite this hierarchy, all the Gurkhas I interviewed claimed to share common traits and could easily be identified from their Nepalese civilian or police counterparts who did not share their same discipline and loyalty.

Additionally, those interviewed tended to draw on the brave and fierce imagery of the Gurkha in order to cope with dangerous incidents they encountered in their private security work. When I asked Baharder how he felt about performing dangerous tasks in Afghanistan, he stated that 'we are already Gurkhas and this is how they [our forefathers] got their name'. Baharder continued, invoking the Gurkha motto. 'It is better to die than to

be a coward. We are also afraid of dangerous things but we have to still put the name *Gurkha* forward and do these dangerous jobs. Because my grandfather and father have done this so we have to'. Drawing upon the deeply-rooted history of his name and the attendant desire to avoid tarnishing its reputation, Baharder accepted most tasks given to him by his employer. Barat also spoke of drawing upon this idea of Gurkha bravery during an ambush of his vehicle convoy in Iraq:

> I heard a Columbian supervisor was killed instantly. The camp was not very far away, just one kilometer. When we got on the road again the vehicle wasn't moving that fast. So the tire was hit but we couldn't go. I had to fix the tire so we could move. At that time I feel that we are the Gurkha, that we have no fear. Don't worry about this...we know we are here, this is a war zone country. If you wish to do the job you have to do it.

I continued to hear various stories of Gurkha bravery and courage in the face of danger without support or amenities. While I was in Nepal at a Gurkha friend's family meal, Kivindra, a retired British Gurkha and uncle of my friend, explained to me how upon losing his team during a private security operation, he was forced to cross through remote and hostile areas of Angola. He had only the clothing he was wearing and his rifle to get to safety. While Kivindra was telling this story, others were laughing. They all claimed that this is what a Gurkha will do in the face of adversity.

It is clear through the interviews that for these men, being a Gurkha meant that they were

able to provide financially for themselves and their families. More importantly, being Gurkha also provided a valuable sense of history and pride and was held in high esteem in their local communities. The Gurkha identity gave them comfort and strength in the physically dangerous situations they encountered in their private security work. While their martial history and Gurkha identity provide them with esteem and a sense of belonging, these men still have to contend with their subordinate status in the international security market.

## 'ALMOST BUT NOT WHITE': UNDERSTANDING RELATIONS WITH WESTERNERS

Mohan, a former British Gurkha whom I spent considerable time with while in Nepal, continuously poked fun at the colonial relationship with the British. On one such occasion, we were at the British Gurkha museum in Pokhara when we were looking at old black and white framed photos of Gurkhas alongside their British officer. In the photos the British officer and Gurkhas stood side by side; their immediate height and physical size difference was apparent. Randhoj laughed as he looked at these images with me. He recalled a story about a Gurkha British officer who came to visit a Gurkha community with his wife. When all the Gurkha men lined up in military formation adorned with their ceremonial uniforms and kukris, the wife of the Gurkha officer commented on how 'cute' these men were. At this point Mohan paused, deepening his voice to impersonate the Gurkha officer responding to his wife by saying, 'Do not touch the Gurkha'. Mohan then laughed and repeated 'do not touch the Gurkha' again in his staged deep voice. His story highlights his acknowledgement

of the irony of the incongruent colonial logics of Gurkhas being both cute and something to be respected and feared.

This incongruent narrative persists in contemporary security operations. The notion of the ideal white contractor juxtaposed with his *almost but not quite* racialised Gurkha counterpart was both reinforced and disputed in my interviews with and observations of white managers and Gurkhas. Most white managers I interviewed throughout my time in Afghanistan stated that Gurkhas were considered better than local contractors at adapting to Western culture. They were also in a good position to linguistically and culturally communicate with local Afghans. Because of their cultural hybridity in their ability to relate to both locals and internationals, Gurkhas were positioned higher in the hierarchy of security contractors than Afghans—yet not on the same level as white contractors. Interviews with three white security managers revealed their belief that Gurkhas lack the specialist skills and cultural competencies held by white contractors that allow them to assume higher-paying roles in the industry.

Some Gurkhas further reinforced these colonial logics themselves. For example, Murat stated that they needed the British and Western men to train them to become professional soldiers/contractors. Fabien too reinforced colonial relations by stating that while being a Gurkha was in his blood, he continues to need assistance from the British in order to move from a natural warrior to a professional soldier/contractor. Murat further claimed that Westerners have more international experience and better communication skills, education and confidence, which justifies their dominant role in the industry. All of the

Gurkhas interviewed stated that the British colonial encounter with their ancestors was an integral moment in shaping their identities as Gurkhas and invariably their understandings of self remain linked to the British.

While the interviewees largely reinforced the discursive differences between Westerners and Gurkhas, the material disparities that resulted from this discursive difference did not receive the same amount of support. In particular, Fabien stated that

> I don't know why there is such a big difference in pay and living. Sometimes ya I know the British are well educated than us and are more professional than us and in that case the salary could be different but in some cases Nepalese are talented and educated but even they are not getting that salary.

When asked how it was working with Westerners and with various security companies, Rabindra commented on the material differences, sharing a view similar to Fabien's:

> It is fine, not bad but there is also huge discrimination between expats [Westerners] and TCNs in the salary and also the living and clothing is different, like the expats used to stay in one person, one room and we are staying in one room for five to six people. There is different dining and different food and different drinks. Whatever food that is in the kitchen [the Westerners] can take whenever they want but we cannot. We have specific times. Always one food, same meal every day, will not change.

The Gurkhas who did not completely accept the colonial logics of difference in living and working conditions were also frustrated over their inability to do anything about their immediate situation. Rabindra expressed his sense of resignation: 'I feel bad, but what to do?' He claimed he could not raise concerns because 'if you do you will be kicked out'. Many Gurkhas appeared to have an overall frustration with the structure of global private security and their lack of agency within this structure. Rabindra commented that

> the security companies are getting the contracts because of the Gurkha. They convince their clients that we are good but we have been cheated by these same companies. This is because they are using your name and yet you are treated completely different.

Security companies market Gurkhas as highly esteemed contractors who are an ideal solution to expensive Westerners. Yet upon contracting Gurkhas, companies appear to treat them as second class to their Western counterparts. This incongruence in the marketing of Gurkhas and their subsequent treatment within operations frustrated Rabindra:

> I don't want to complain about the salary but at least lodging and food should be fair. We don't say salary must be equal with the Europeans and Americans because their living expenses is higher but in our country you can survive…in the case of lodging and food, all the facilities should be fair. Because we are working the same work… for

> example, I used to work in airport and my team was one Gurkha and one is expat and we are doing the same work but they are getting 15,000 dollars and I am getting 1,700 dollars.

Not all the men interviewed openly expressed this frustration over the difference in pay and living conditions. Barat talked about being with a company who takes good care of him. Yet Barat's story appeared to be exceptional within those of the men interviewed. Overall, a general feeling emerged amongst the interviewees that while they accepted the Western standard within the security industry as the ideal, they did not understand why this justified the substantial disparities in pay and living conditions.

It is difficult to discern how much of this racial hierarchy spoken of and reinforced by Gurkha men is due to their military or colonial socialisation with the white Westerner. In reality, the two cannot be separated. Certainly, however, their training and relationship with the British military and their own history and understanding of self is still heavily embedded in colonial logics. When I asked Gurkha men in individual interviews to describe the history of Gurkhas, they all stated that it originated with the British. To most men interviewed, the British military brought the Gurkha into being. Additionally, these men reinforced the notion of the white security contractor as the ideal in the industry, but continued to question whether this archetype actually justified the vast material differences between Gurkhas and white Westerners.

**MOVING MARGINS: GURKHAS TRANSFORMING CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITIES**

Racialised contractors within the security industry must accommodate more hardship than others. This accommodation is seen in the living and working conditions these men sign onto—Agthangelou and Ling (2009: 89) highlight the ingenuity that people at the margins have historically displayed. Here the Gurkhas I interviewed engaged or struck a bargain (Sa'ar 2005) with neoliberal markets in the hopes of obtaining a better material existence and fulfilling the social obligations back home of financially assisting their families and extended families. Some men's participation went beyond mere financial gain in their investment in the martial self-perception of being Gurkha. Identifying as Gurkha gave them a proud history as well as strength in adverse or dangerous situations they encountered.

How Gurkhas understand their own representations and reasons for striking this bargain with an industry with rests on their marginal status is far from simple.[xii] Gurkhas use what they can to achieve their goal of a better life. For one group of interviewees, this came at a further commodification of their martial race. This self-commodification was sustained through adopting martial logics in understanding their role within the industry and seeing Gurkha as more of a calling than an individual choice. From another group, the narrative that emerged was a realisation of the paradoxical and unstable nature of their representations. Participating in the industry was a short-term sacrifice to support long-term educational gains for their children and the hopes of increasing their families' opportunities.

For the former self-conceptualisation, the interviewees stated that there was something exceptional about their martial status. Some opined that white men had to be trained whereas the Gurkha already had natural attributes which only had to be harnessed. The Gurkhas could use the skills from their white mentors, but the white men could never have the natural warrior spirit that was in the Gurkha bloodline (Muran). Their masculinities were wrapped in an understanding of self based upon a personal perception as warrior-like, owing to a natural physical strength and mental courage in battle—something written about extensively in Gurkha officer memoirs (Cross and Gurung 2007; Parker 1999).

The latter group saw the security industry as something short-term and as a sacrifice that they wanted to end with them. In one such interview, Barat spoke at length about the importance of education in order to open up opportunities for young men and women:

> Without education you cannot get anything. If you can't study, you don't have a future… So what I did for my children I did a time set. You come from school, you have to eat, then you have to study, and I always check their homework and their bags to make sure they are good. I always go to see their teachers and the principal to see how they are doing.

For Barat, achieving a high education, instead of becoming a Gurkha, meant a better material life because it affords more opportunities in the global economy. Education was the tool required to better take care of one's family and community financially. He expressed that he wanted all his children to achieve this high education. Kavindra also

stated that ‘in the future if I have a son, I would put emphasis on the study side, not the military side’. For both Kavindra and Barat, their focus was more on the economic benefits of being a Gurkha—and a sacrifice that they did not wish their children to repeat.

For other interviewees still, Gurkha identities were somewhere in the middle of a realised, commodified construction and something inherently biological. Several of the men I interviewed would tell me that they were proud of their Gurkha service and would boast about being a part of a particular regiment. Those interviewed, such as Baharder and Randhoj, used their identity as Gurkhas to justify much of their contemporary security roles, which took them to dangerous parts of Afghanistan and afforded them few comforts. According to Baharder, Gurkhas were brave and hearty and were the best contractor for this type of work. They were happy that they could do a job they were both proud of and good at. They did not necessarily see being a Gurkha as something in their blood, but something that reflected a long and important history in their own family or community. Finally, being a Gurkha gave some of these men a personal history and a solid sense of self. Baharder stated that because his father and grandfather both served as Gurkhas, he felt destined to become one also. Whilst the concept of ‘Gurkha’ may have had its origins in constructed colonial imagery, those interviewed believe that it was their obligation to continue the Gurkha reputation through their conduct in military and private security service.

Most of the men whom I interviewed in Pokhara, Nepal in May 2010, would tell me that they had three careers.. The first was with the military, the second with private security

and the third in community development. The first two jobs were to ensure that they could economically provide for their families, sending their children to school abroad and assuring that their parents, children and communities were otherwise financially supported. Both these careers took them away from their families and community networks for considerable amounts of time and were considered to be a sacrifice. The third career could begin largely once their children had been educated and these men could settle into communities with their extended families and friends. Those interviewed were building cooperative banks, grocery stores and networking for other business opportunities. This third career was that in which most of the retired Gurkhas I interviewed in Nepal took the most pride. These three careers are markers of the Gurkhas' understanding of their own martial histories and the transformative ways in which they remake this history and rebuild their communities.

Throughout my research I found that Gurkhas are defining and claiming their colonial history as well as seeking transformative ways to change this history. They do this by creating more opportunities for their sons and daughters through international education as well as by directly investing in their own communities. What these examples reinforce is that far from being the victims of their colonial histories or even serving as the stereotyped ideal of the loyal and trustworthy soldier, these men are active agents, each transforming their conditions of possibilities and the futures for their families in different ways.

**CONCLUSION**

Scholarship investigating private security continues to focus on the normative and regulatory practices of these security companies and how they are changing our understanding of international security. Out of this scholarship, little attention is dedicated to the racial and gender implications of these operations and to date, there has been little discussion as to how subaltern men within the industry make sense of the gender hierarchies amongst security contractors. Research on masculinities in private security tends to glorify and normalise white masculinities. Failing to engage with the ways in which colonial histories constitute contemporary security practises aids in the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinities within private security, and the archetype of security contractors remains white and Western. Yet, as emerging journalistic and scholastic research indicates, these men remain both silenced and indispensable: silenced because their narrative is often overlooked, and indispensable because they provide cheaper alternatives to costly Western contractors and perform more menial and dangerous contractual work.

Most Gurkhas interviewed understand the structural inequalities that being a Gurkha in private security brings, but they also willingly serve as a part of the industry, each rationalising their own role with the improvement of the opportunities for their children. Gurkhas continue to contest and negotiate their own martial masculinities in order to maximise their life trajectories. Some Gurkhas do this by completely rejecting their martiality, and some by further exploiting their own reputations in order to garner more contracts in the industry.

Most men I interviewed claimed to want more for their children beyond seeking military opportunities. Their desire for alternative choices for their sons and daughters might also be due to their awareness that annual recruitment of Gurkhas into the British military is consistently being scaled down and so the opportunities for their children to enlist might be limited in the future.

However, this is not to say that martial identity appears to be weakening in Nepal for Gurkhas. So long as there are economic and social incentives, there are young Nepalese men signing up on a daily basis to take on these identities—even if they continue to participate only in a limited role. Exploring the history of this process and how Gurkhas make sense of their history allows one to problematise the privilege and hidden whiteness embedded in racial masculinities and examine the transformative ways Gurkhas construct their own identities.

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[i] The literature centres around concerns over regulations (Howe 1998; Cilliers and Mason 1999; Muthein and Taylor 2002; Ortiz 2004; De Nevers 2009), appropriateness of private versus public security providers (Brooks 2001; Carafano 2008; Mandel 2001; Perry 2007; Rasor and Bauman 2007), the normative and legal challenges with employing private forces in insecure spaces (Carmola 2004; Bures 2005; Leander 2005; Bicanic and Bourque 2006; Percy 2007, 2009) and the larger concerns linking Privatised Security Companies (PSC) to neoliberal governance agendas (Lock 1999; Drohan 2003; Leander 2006).

[ii] I understand the problematic, crude and somewhat misleading use of the 'global North' and 'global South'. Yet, like Morrell and Swart (2005), I contend that the world continues to bear marks of colonialism and these are seen in the particular geographic tropes used to divide up the world. For ease of reference I use 'global South' to refer to the less industrialised regions of the world which the security industry exploits for cheaper labour. The 'global North' refers to the more industrialised nations where the ideal white security contractor, security company owners and the client of security come from.

[iii] Sherman and Di Domenico 2009; Vines 1999; Maclellan 2007; Barker 2009; Higate 2009; 2012c; Stillman 2011.

[iv] A plethora of books which describe the Gurkha in exotic and martial terms can be found through a simple internet search. Some books include J.P. Cross and Gurung B. Gurkha's *At War: Eyewitness Accounts from World War II to Iraq* (Greenhill Books, 2002); J. Parker's *The Gurkhas: The Inside Story of the World's Most Feared Soldiers* (Headline Book Publishing, 1999); and C. Bullock's *Britain's Gurkhas* (Third Millennium Publishing, 2009).

[v] Connell 1987; Morgan 1992; Hearn 1998; Morrell and Swart 2005; Parpart 2008.

[vi] Razack 2004; Tickner 2004; Peterson 2007; McKelvey 2007; Parpart and Zalewski 2008.

[vii] Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Hearn 1998; Higate et al. 2003; Hutchings 2008; Archer 2001; Hooper 2001; McKelvey 2007; Elias and Beasley 2009.

[viii] Like the global North, the West is 'a name always associating itself with those regions, communities, and people that appear politically or economically superior in other regions, communities and peoples' (Sakai 1998, in Charkrabarty 2000: 3).

[ix] 'Mutable masculinities' is a concept derived from Higate when discussing how security contractors adapt to their particular geopolitical environments.

[x] Singer 2003; Leander 2005; Kinsey 2006; Rasor and Bauman 2007; Travernise and Glanz 2007; Percy 2009; Sherman and DiDomenico 2009; Vardi 2009.

[xi] Enloe 1980; Caplan 1995; Khalidi 2001-2002; Streets 2003; Golay 2006.

[xii] Sa'ar defines liberal bargain as a process where men are appropriated into the economic system that rests on their ultimate exclusion. In this bargain, men and women, constituted at the margins of their political/economic spheres, strategise with whatever they have to allow them to at least engage. It is the hope that through this engagement they can eventually move more into the centre of the economy. This bargain is sustained by some exceptional situations where marginal men improve their conditions of possibilities by actually adopting liberal economic logics.